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2 September 1980

MEMORANDUM

TURKEY: DOMESTIC POLITICAL SITUATION

Deep, seated and interrelated political, economic, and internal security problems cast doubt on the long term prospects for Turkish democracy. []

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Prime Minister Demirel took bold steps on the economic front (in January) in spite of the prospect of a strongly negative political reaction to the austerity program, but lack of cooperation between him and opposition leader Ecevit has stymied progress on political issues. Demirel has called for an early election this fall in hope of breaking the impasse and winning a clear parliamentary majority. National Salvation Party leader Erbakan--one of Demirel's two informal coalition partners--has further roiled the political waters by introducing his own motion for early elections. In a transparent attempt to profit from the government's troubles, Erbakan accuses Demirel of arbitrary rule and failure to cope with the nation's pressing problems. Extremists, too, seek to exploit popular skepticism and discontent arising from the continuing stalemate and Demirel's economic austerity measures; their goal is to undermine the political system and, depending on their ideological bent, to pave the way for either a popular uprising or an authoritarian regime. []

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All of these factors add up to an unstable domestic political situation. The major political parties--Demirel's Justice Party and Ecevit's Republican People's Party--have been unable to cooperate with each other or to deal effectively with Turkey's pressing problems. The conservative minority Demirel government that came to power last November--with the informal backing of the Islamic fundamentalist National Salvation Party and the neofascist National Action Party--has sought to curb the rising terrorism that now takes more than 12 lives a day, but political bickering between Demirel and Ecevit has precluded concerted action. Although they pledged last month to work for the passage of five security bills that would strengthen the courts and the powers of martial law authorities, disagreements over substance could lead to further delays. The Turkish military is anxiously awaiting this legislation and may once again take a hand behind the scenes if the bills are not passed quickly. [REDACTED]

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The military's concern has been heightened by the lack of progress toward electing a permanent president because parliament cannot consider substantive legislation until a new president formally takes office. The election process has already consumed more than 110 parliamentary ballots over the past six months. Demirel seeks to delay the election to this prestigious office--traditionally the link between the military and the politicians--not only because he wants to place his own man in the office, but also because he hopes to strengthen the powers of the presidency through constitutional changes. The presidential election has also been delayed by censure motions against the government, which narrowly survived a no-confidence vote in June. Similar motions now shaping up against some ministers, however, are not likely to do more than embarrass the government. [REDACTED]

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The military commanders will continue to monitor the situation closely in their traditional role as guardians of the state. Last January, they warned party leaders to stop their bickering and cooperate in solving dire problems, but the politicians have persisted in their business-as-usual approach. Intervention in the political process will continue to be a live option, but the commanders will be reluctant to exercise it because they would prefer to let the democratic process take its course. They are also restrained by the knowledge that they do not have answers to the problems that are plaguing the country. [REDACTED]

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If military intervention becomes imperative, it is likely to take the form of stepped up behind-the-scenes pressure. Military leaders may see no alternative to direct intervention, however, if the politicians continue their squabbles. Although they recognize that such a move would probably play into the hands of the extremists, the commanders may feel compelled to act to save the country from complete chaos.

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